"GUILT AND FAITH"
LUKE 3:7-21
FEBRUARY 24, 1974

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One of the most important, although disturbing, experiences in my academic preparation for ministry came in a class called Religion and Personality. Part of the agenda of that particular class was to expose the student to the disciplines of Medical Science and Psychiatry. The experience I remember occured when a leading Chicago Psychiatrist and Professor in Psychiatry in the Medical School met with us. He began his presentation by calling most ministers "guilt-mongers", and went on for one hour to score the institutional church for implanting, cultivating, nuturing and even creating a sense of guilt in the hearts of men. He pointed out that guilt has always been the lever used by Christian faith to pry men into the Church. He pointed out that Christian faith begins with an insistance on Man's sin: and thatmany, if not most, pulpit utterances depend on the listener's sense of personal rotteness. And it's not just petty wrong-doing, he pointed out. Rather the church seems to be telling a man that he is an offense to God simply by being a man: and worse yet, he was born that way: there is nothing he can do about it.

The good Doctor suggested that it amounted to psychological black mail: that if a thoughtful man bought it, he really had no option but to join the church. For having convinced him of his terrible guilt the church then modestly offers itself as the only way to be free of that guilt.

It was disturbing because, frankly - at that point in time, it felt like a rather righteous thing - to be studying for the ministry. But here was a man suggesting that the faith itself was somehow injurous to the mental health of people: criticizing the church - not for all the typical reasons, but out of a deep commitment to the welfare and peace and happiness of individual men and women.

It was a disturbing experience, precisely because the Doctor had hold of something terribly true about religion. Consider the Middle Ages, for instance. The whole elaborate structure of midieval Christianity depended

on people feeling guilty - and, of course, trusting that the rites and sacraments of the Church were the only means of elleviating that guilt. The story of Martin Luther is the story of a man spending half his life desparately trying to be free of guilt: going through the motions, praying, fasting, making pilgrimages, doing penance, even whipping himself in order to find peace and freedom from his heavy load of guilt.

And today, today it is still with us. In a rather classic sense Christian preaching and teaching is still identified with convicting statements such as: "You are a sinner - you are guilty - you are no good at all." In fact, the masochist in a lot of people seems to rather enjoy it: to measure the quality of preaching by the amount of guilt it heaps on the shoulders of its hearers.

Paul Tournier, Psychiatrist and Theologian, points out that no man is without guilt, and that guilt is, finally, a religious problem. We do carry a lot of guilt around with us. Think about it for a minute: Guilt that we did something wrong in the past, the memory of which continues to haunt us: Guilt that somehow we're not living up to our expectations: guilt that we're not better parents, better husbands and wives, better professionals, better citizens, better Christians. John Ruskin once noted that "life without industry is guilt", and I know the truth of that. If I sit around the house very long doing nothing I begin to feel guilty. And then beneath it all is this underlying religious guilt, this universal sense that something is wrong: I'm guilty: this feelting that the theologians call "original sin", which tells me I'm not what I ought to be: I'm separated and estranged from that which is fundamental and good and pure.

All of this ought to bother us for two reasons. In the first place guilt is not a good motivator. We know that people don't ordinarily become better people as a result of feeling bad. In all area of life, people are motivated to do more - to be more - not by being told how guilty they are for doing and being less, but by being supported and accepted and loved. Good

teachers know that: business executives know it: football coaches know it. I joke about guilt. People say to me: "I feel so guilty for not coming to Church". Ordinarily I laugh about that and allow as how a healthy sense of guilt never hurt anybody. But I really don't mean that because it's not true Guilt is not a good motivator - and it does hurt.

The second reason it ought to bother us, however, is that playing on guilt is so contrary to Jesus' method of dealing with people - contrary, that is to say, to the Gospel, regardless of how it is and has been in the church. For example, consider the stark contrast between the two types of religion expressed by John the Baptist - and Jesus of Nazareth. Consider what transpired when they met one day.

John the Baptist is an intriguing figure. He came out of the desert around 30 A.D. preaching that the Kingdom of God was at hand. He used the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord.
Make straight in the desert
a highway for one God."

In days of old messengers were sent ahead of the King to tell the people to make the roads ready.

So John saw his mission to prepare men's lives for the coming of the Messiah. He told people to repent and be baptized in order to get ready. He told them about a day of fire and judgment: when the wheat would be separated from the chaff: and when he saw Jesus of Nazareth he said: "This is the one."

Who was he? We don't know really. Apparently he was related to Jesus. Some scholars believe that he was orphaned by his elderly parents and then adopted by one of rigid, ascetic desert religious communities of the day. The Essenes, for instance, who rigidly adhered to the moral law, who practiced ritual bathing, who were celibate and supported their community by adopting and raising orphans, and who were quite intense in their conviction that the time had come for the Messiah.

The suggestion that John the Baptist was an Essene makes some sense. He was, apparently, a wild-looking man, dressed in the rough garb of the wilderness, eating locust and wild honey. And the people saw in him a prophet: they flocked out from the towns and villages to hear him thundering on the banks of the Jordan River.

His approach was guilt. John had a black list that included almost everyone from Rome to Jerusalem. When the people came to hear him he compared them to snakes that scurry out from under the rocks in order to excape fire. He made them feel bad - remorseful - angry with themselves - guilty.

One of the ones who came to the banks of the Jordan to hear John was Jesus. There is an endless debate about why he wanted to be baptized by John. The best explanation, I think, is that he appreciated John's integrity and courage , and that he saw in John the beginnings of a movement toward God and toward a renewal of morality and justice and righteousness-a movement with which he wanted to identify.

And so one day, he walked into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized - to make himself ready for God's mighty act - and what happened then is most significant: in fact, set against the backdrop of John's fierce harangues, most startling. He was baptized: he prayed: and a voice came to him, personally, saying "You are my Son. With you I am most pleased". The experience is devoid of guilt, remorse, repentance, - Granted, it was Jesus and not just any man. Nevertheless the experience is positive - supporative - loving - inspiring - and not frightening, negative, threatening. It stands in stark contrast to the message and vision of John the Baptist.

His ministry, likewise, contrasts with John. No where do you find him playing on guilt. He didn't put people down. His rare anger seems to have been reserved for religious hypocricy - nev er for those who were made to feel guilty by their religion. Those people - Mary the prostitute, for instance - who could not have been more guilty in the context of her religion - he

supported and helped and lifted her up and loved. Rather than convict men on the ba sis of their obvious failings and frailties - he held up before them what they could become - and they became it. He treated men not as eye-sores to God, but as children of God: and they began to act like it. He took a man by the name of Peter, a rough, outspoken, vascillating fisherman and called him a Rock. And Peter became a Rock.

His motivational power was the power of positive, accepting love. And there was no guilt in it at all - at least none that he put in.

We know today the importance of a sense of self-worth; self-esteem. We know that you can't really love anybody until you love yourself. We know that few peole seem to have it - this rare, confident sense of my own worth: and we know that guilt - a sense of guilt - stands in the way.

We come to some conclusion about our own worth as persons quite early in life. Our self image is intact by the age of six or so. Some psychologists maintain that it happens much earlier. Cecil Osborne observes that "If the child does not grow up with a strong sense of self worth, he may be limited in his capacity to relate creatively to others." (The Art of Self Understanding, P. 213) "A young child has no clear image of himself. He sees himself only in the mirror of his parent's evaluation". (Ibid.P.162)

Now, before we find ourselves feeling guilty for making our children feel guilty let it be said again that no man is without guilt. Tournier says flatly: "....a guilty conscience is the seasoning of our daily life. All upbringing is a cultivation of the sense of guilt on an intensive scale". (Guilt and Grace, P.10) Only the naive, it seems to me, will talk about total freedom from all feelings of guilt. We don't even know what that would mean.

And yet, it seems to me, that we might begin to learn about the effects of some of the things we do and say to each other, and to our children.

"Mama won't love you if you do that" - means I am not lovable as me. That is not how we intend it, but that is how it gets heard.

"Get an A in Math and I'll pay you a dollar" - means your love for me depends on my ability to get good grades.

"You'll never amount to anything: you're just lazy: look at the mess - can't you do anything right? You'll never succeed..." The litany of well-meaning, performance oriented parents, and it all adds up to guilt. And if we understand that the emotional super-structure is in place by the age of six - we're going to carry that guilt, that low estimation of self right into adulthood. We live out of it in one of two ways. We can live our lives trying to prove our worth, trying to work off the guilt at having disappointed our parents: and no success, no achievement will ever be adequate. Every new day - is a new battle to fought with the prize a sense of personal worth. Or we will act out literally our guilt. If we feel lazy - we will be lazy. If we feel like we can't accomplish something, we will not accomplish it. If we were told that we were good for nothing - we will be good for nothing.

The implications are immense. We've been thinking in terms of parenting because all of us had parents - and all of us live out of that relationship. But equally significant are the implications of our relationships with others - friends, employees, neighbors. And finally, consider what happens in context of society. Beyond any point of rationale debate it has been proven that penal institutions don't work. Emphasizing guilt, treating a man on the basis of his guilt, reminding him of his guilt, allowing him to wallow in his guilt, simply makes him unfit - ever - for a creative relationship with the rest of society. Something like 80% of the people incarcerated today will break the law, get caught and return to prison - after they are released. The mystery is why it is still an issue: why so glaring a failure is allowed to continue: why we still nod in approval when politicians talk about cracking down on crimminals and getting tough. It doesn't work and never has.

Guilt is, finally, a religious problem. And the importance of all this is that we cannot love, fully, openly, honestly, until we sense that we are

lovable that we are worthy. We cannot, simply stated, love our spouses, our children, our fellow man, our God, if we are all tied up with guilt.

Jesus knew that: the 19th century Danish Theologian, Soren Kierkegaard observed that:

"When the commandment to love one's neighbor is rightly understood, it also says the converse, 'Thou shalt love thyself in the right way: If anyone, therefore, will not learn from Christianity to love himself in the right way, then neither can he love his neighbor. He may perhaps..cling to one of several other human beings, but this is by no means loving one's neighbor. To love oneself in the right way, and to love one's neighbor, are absolutely analogous concepts, and are at the bottom one and the same." (Works of Love)

How shall we love ourselves? How shall we rise above whatever guilt we are carrying around? It helps, obviously, if there is someone who loves and accepts us as we are: someone for whom we don't have to perform. And that we can do for each other in the church - in our relationship with friends in our families. Beyond that we can walk to the banks of the Jordan River with our guilt in tow and there listen for a voice that says to all who come: "You are my Son" You are my daughter: I am pleased with you."

That is the difference between Jesus and John: between Christian faith and guilt-ridden religion: that - it is my deepest conviction - is the incredible nature of the Good News. Jesus' experience at Baptism can be ours. It was not, I believe, reserved for him alone. Rather it was the disclosure of a God who loves and accepts us as we are: a God who knows how much more we could love and live and be; a God whose power is not wielded in the form of guilt-inducing judgement - but in the form of accepting, forgiving, creative love.

To know that God - to lay bare one's heart and soul to that love is the only conversion experience we ever need. It is - and always will be - intensely personal - as it was for Jesus. No one heard that voice but him. It will happen - not once - but again and again in life: moments of pure

revelation, in which we know ourselves to be known: moments when we know that there is no need for guilt because we are loved by a God who is pleased with us: Moments that free us to love him in return. AMEN

FATHER: the good news is so good that we have trouble believing it. Help us to love ourselves: to understand that you love us: and free us, then, to love - even as we are loved. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN